

“Signs, Signs, Everywhere Signs”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

January 16, 2022 – The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11

“Signs, signs, everywhere a sign!” Do you remember that song, which was a hit from the Canadian group Five Man Electrical Band back in 1971? I don’t remember it from that time, as I wasn’t yet formed, but I do remember the cover of the song from the band Tesla, which was also a hit in 1990. The song was written by Five Man Electrical Band’s lead singer Les Emmerson about the many billboards and road signs that he saw while on a road trip on Route 66 in California that were everywhere and impossible to miss.

Today’s story from our reading from the gospel of John tells of another hard-to-miss sign, the first of seven miracles in the gospel that are called “signs.” Like the many billboards and road signs of Emmerson’s song, these several signs were meant to be noticed, for us to look at and consider as we travel along life’s journey. Through these visible signs of Jesus, he acted miraculously to serve others, but these actions also pointed to the unique, divine qualities of Jesus that should inspire faith in him and they point to beautiful qualities of God, especially that God is loving and that God’s love for us is active, unfailing, and everlasting. This is the heart of the gospel: That God has shown us that God loves us too much to leave us alone in the messes we’ve created. God does not abandon us. Even in the midst of our most desperate hour, God is with us, working miracles in us and through us. Not because of what we’ve done or not done, but simply because God loves us!

Earlier this week, for some reason, Christine and I were flipping through TV channels and came across the several religious channels offered by our TV service provider, none of which, I will admit, we normally watch. However, we decided to tune in for a minute to a couple of them just to witness their novelty. And I think it was just a minute or two as that’s about all I can take in one sitting of some, especially the high-energy prosperity gospel preachers. The program we tuned into this week was led by one such person, slimily calling for us to give money so that God could bless us. Just give a “seed” of \$200, he said, and God would grow a miracle in the giver’s life. He even implored his audience who

struggle with credit card debt to use their credit card to make the donation so that God could bless their card and miraculously erase their debt. This is pretty awful stuff and goes completely against the gospel that I understand. The gospel I know to be true does not require you to give money so that you can be blessed. You are loved by God and blessed by God no matter what you give, financially or otherwise, to this church or any other church or ministry. God is not motivated by money, and God does not need a seed of it from you to grow a miracle in your life.

But there are actions you can take, including actions with your giving, that can help make miracles happen in your life and in the world.

Like Jesus' mother Mary in today's story, you can remind God of the real needs of people around you as well as your own need. Notice that Jesus acted only after being nudged by his mother to pay attention to the needs of others and to act, not on his own time, but at that moment. Like Mary, you can be a witness of the needs of others, and through prayer, you can nudge God to act in this moment in the lives of the people you love, in the world around you, and in your own life. Through prayer, you can be an active participant in God's miracles of transformation that address the needs of the world.

And when you witness God performing miracles in your life or in the lives of others, you can be like the chief steward in recognizing the greatness of God's miraculous work, giving praise to God, and proclaiming to all around how wonderful and beautiful God's works are. In so doing, you can be an angel of good news, telling people about how God takes the ordinary and transforms it into the extraordinary, which in turn transforms bad news into good news. You can call people to avert their gaze for a moment from the 24/7 news cycle, which keeps people hooked by focusing on the never-ending train wreck of human experience, to pay attention to the many lovely, wreck-repairing works of God in the lives of people.

These signs of God's love are all around us and within us. Right here in this building, there are many such signs. Families without enough food being fed because of the gifts and work of others is a miracle that we celebrate. In a fractured society, where we struggle to converse with people who differ from us, and so many voices tell us we should actually fear and hate those who are

different, we gather together, even with our many differing viewpoints, ideologies, and traditions, as one family. Our unity while being diverse is a life-giving sign of God at work. It shows that we've got the wine, the good stuff -- the best stuff -- of God! When we look beyond the things that could divide us and love one another, we do the work of evangelists, proclaiming the good news that there is wholeness and goodness in this broken world of ours.

And we can be like the servants in the story. They lugged around the ceremonial jars, filled with water for religious rites, which they presumably carried in from a well somewhere, and then they also did the work of dispensing the better stuff that God made out of the old, lifeless, bland water. Christ took the water, which symbolizes joyless, stodgy religious rituals, and transformed it into something superior: Wine, which, throughout our scriptures, symbolizes spiritual blessedness, prosperity, and abundance. The servants took this good stuff -- the best stuff -- and didn't just tell people about how good it was, they actively distributed it to the people. That's our role, O church! We serve God and people by not hoarding the best stuff we have been given, but by freely distributing it to others in a spirit of celebration.

God empowers us, each in our own way, to joyously carry the great grace of God to others. We do this, like Martin Luther King, Jr., whose grace-distributing work we celebrate this weekend, when we work to create a more just society, where all people are shown equal dignity and respect. We do this when we offer monetary donations to the church and other organizations that promote justice and goodness in the world. We do this in our work to feed bodies through the Pantry and Community Dinner and to nourish the spirits of our children through the Purpose School, our CE program, and our support of troops of girl scouts and boy scouts. We do this when we celebratorily sing of God's love in our cantatas offered to the community. In all of our giving, we are not just recipients of God's miraculous work of transformation, but participants in it. So, this day and every day, let us be a living sign of God's redeeming love for the world. Amen.